

## Love, Idolatry, and Patriotism

### 1.

Patriotism requires love of country. We all know that. Yet we do not usually consider patriotism seriously in relation to love, which is how I propose to consider it. In so doing, I try to throw some light on the question of patriotism's moral status.

I begin by sketching some claims about what is worthy of love, what might count as a reason to love, and what it is to love well or badly. These provide the basis for a contrast I draw between morally innocent and idolatrous love, which in turn yields a distinction between an innocent patriotism and its idolatrous mutations. But the moral innocence of one kind of patriotism does not mean that anyone has an obligation to be patriotic or that patriotism counts as a virtue. I reject the view that patriotism is obligatory by examining the contrast between patriotic love and the love between parents and children, where an obligation to love has been traditionally and plausibly imputed. To identify the conditions under which patriotism might count as a virtue, I turn to the conception of moral learning defended in Part III of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's theory locates the development of the sense of justice within a succession of associative attachments, beginning with the family and culminating in the civic friendship of the well-ordered society. The concept of patriotism is important to understanding how the sense of justice fortifies just institutions against erosion under ideal conditions. However, the success of Rawls's argument on this point plainly does not mean that patriotism is likely to serve any high moral purpose outside ideal conditions. I argue that although patriotism takes morally variable forms in substantially unjust conditions, its wholesale moral repudiation is a bad mistake.

The case I make for the moral value of patriotism under some non-ideal conditions is entirely consistent with the following reasonable surmise: whatever benefits come from honorable patriotism are outweighed by the harm done by its idolatrous counterparts, to say nothing of the consequences of still baser passions that masquerade as patriotism. If humanity could make a bargain with God to make patriotism disappear, so that all its harms evaporated along with its benefits, maybe we should

take the deal. But no such bargain is on offer. We live in the midst of societies in which patriotism remains a potent force in many people's lives. When their patriotism is implicated in tribal hatreds and delusions of national grandeur, we wish that it would simply go away. Yet the object of our wish will often be a worse outcome, and it will certainly in general be a less feasible option than enticing their patriotism in a morally better direction. After all, being told to give up what you love is a harder message for anyone to heed than being told that you should love it better. Unfortunately, blanket indictments of patriotism that refuse to make moral distinctions within the indicted category merely obscure the range of practical responses that are necessary to foster the good it enables and mitigate the evil it promotes. My main purpose here is to make clearer the morally important distinction we need to make within the category of patriotism; it is not to argue that humanity is better off overall for the consequences of patriotism than we would be without them.

## 2.

What makes something worth loving? And when something is worth loving, what is the difference between loving it well and loving it badly? The two questions are different but easily confused.

You might hope that a good answer to the first question would show the world to be replete with things that are worth loving, because our lives are diminished when we find little to love. The outer limit of that hope is magnificently expressed in a poem by Patrick Kavanagh: "But nothing whatever is by love debarred/The common and banal her heat can know."<sup>1</sup> If we can sometimes exult in this possibility, as Kavanagh does, we might at other times deplore the human propensity to overrate the common and banal. And no doubt Kavanagh's exultation will seem like crazy exuberance to anyone who is not already predisposed to think that loving lavishly is a good thing. Yet there is reason to think that the predisposition is pretty widespread, for an account of what is worth loving broadly in keeping with the enormous range of actual human loves could not impose any strenuous criteria on what is properly eligible for our most exalted passion. We unashamedly love unremarkable cats and dogs, mediocre books, trivial jobs, and ugly houses with unmemorable yards, in addition to our perfectly ordinary friends, kin, and lovers.

No reproach to the one who loves is justified merely because some alternative, more worthy object than the one actually loved is available but unloved. In fact, the lover may be perfectly aware of the modest value that

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick Kavanagh, "The Hospital," in Peter Kavanagh (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York: The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1972), p. 279.

the beloved has in the larger scheme of things without that thought diminishing love. And so a lavish love of the merely ordinary does not in fact entail that the lover overrates the object of love. As Robert Adams notes, “love should have some of the character of grace, inasmuch as its preferences should not be calibrated in accordance with objective value.”<sup>2</sup> If a colleague and I become fast friends, I cannot be justly criticized merely for failing to befriend some other, more admirable colleague instead. Love is dependent on idiosyncrasies of personal history and sensibility in a way that makes the question of what is worth loving for anyone in particular altogether different from the question of what is admirable for everyone. (That is one very good reason we should be wary of those who like to moralize about what other people should love.) In fact, if I adjusted the affection I extend to my supposed friends strictly according to a calibration of their objective value, it would seem not merely that I fail to love them as I should but that I fail to love them at all. The very existence of love seems to require a certain emotional generosity toward its object independent of what any dispassionate evaluation of the object’s merits could warrant.<sup>3</sup>

What I have called the generosity of love might make it seem irrational. Would we not be better off if all our emotions were strictly “calibrated in accordance with objective value”? One good reason for saying no has to do with the stability of our deepest emotional investments in the world, and hence, the very stability of the self. If love were governed by a strictly impartial evaluation of its objects, it would have to be reduced or withdrawn whenever new imperfections or frailties in the beloved were exposed or more worthy objects of possible love became available to the lover. The generosity intrinsic to love is no guarantee that our loves will not be unstable—the idea of fickle love is not an oxymoron, after all—but emotional attachments governed by impartial appraisal would make them contingent and mutable to a degree that rules out the good of adequately stable love. By the same token, love’s generosity means that the beloved (assuming that the beloved is a person) can rationally hope for the persistence of love even when our merits prove to be less radiant than they might initially have seemed. After all, very few scholars would have loving spouses if the persistence of our spouse’s love depended on the estimate of our intellectual brilliance that we might have inspired in the first flush of romance.

The generosity of love has some relevance to Mill’s notorious remarks on the Breton or Basque patriot who forgoes identification with

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). My discussion of love is heavily indebted to this masterly book.

<sup>3</sup>This does not mean that we cannot love those whom we underrate. The parents of adolescents often rationally console themselves with the thought that the children who regard them as imbeciles still love them. The generosity of love may coincide with uncharitable, even grossly unfair underestimation.

French civilization to “sulk on his own rock, the half-savage relic of past times”.<sup>4</sup> It would of course take a very ignorant Breton or Basque to suppose that the modest achievements of his ancient culture could compare with the glories of French civilization, though I suppose outré multiculturalists could manage that remarkable feat just as well. However, that no more gives the Breton or Basque a reason to abandon his patriotism than the availability of women more beautiful and wise than Harriet Taylor could have given Mill a reason to abandon the love of his life.

But the attachments of the Breton or Basque patriot to their respective countries—and indeed, the attachment of Mill to Harriet Taylor—entail something deeper than the emotional generosity that all love requires. They exemplify what I shall call love’s “constancy.” Love’s constancy is a species of loyalty, and love is certainly possible without constancy. The mere fact that a love endures and is regularly expressed in the lover’s choices is not a sufficient condition of constancy. What is also necessary is devotion or at least some general willingness to incur significant cost for the sake of the beloved. I have loved Beethoven’s music since adolescence, listen to it regularly at home and in my car, and occasionally attend concerts where his music is performed. But the question of my making any sacrifice for Beethoven’s music simply does not arise for me, nor do I see myself as committed in any way, for example, to increasing public appreciation of Beethoven or raising standards of performance of his works. If my musical tastes were to change so that time spent listening to Mozart always seemed a more attractive prospect than listening to Beethoven, I would abandon Beethoven without the least compunction.

The general point here is that some loves are ethically passive because they imply no loyalty or fidelity to the beloved. And my example suggests that there will often be nothing amiss in these loves. (Why should my life or anyone else’s be better overall if I dedicated myself to increasing public appreciation of Beethoven’s music? I have better things to do.) Of course, constancy is necessary to secure the stabilizing effects on our emotional investments in the world that are enabled by love’s generosity, and to whatever extent these effects are good, constancy functions as a virtue. If all my loves were as vulnerable to contingency as my love of Beethoven, I would not be the husband, the father, or the friend whom I want to be and whom my spouse, children, and friends would also presumably want me to be. Still, the question can arise for any particular love whether constancy makes it a better thing than it would otherwise be. “Is this worth loving?” and “Is this worth loving with constancy?” are not the same question. I return to this point later in relation to patriotic love. I want now to say a little about reasons for love.

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<sup>4</sup>John Stuart Mill, *Considerations of Representative Government*, in *Utilitarianism; On Liberty; Representative Government*, ed. H.B. Acton (London: Dent, 1972), pp. 363-64.

Suppose Kavanagh were right that “the common and banal” can properly know love’s celebratory heat. It would not follow that he was literally correct in thinking that nothing whatever is debarred by love. If nothing were debarred, then anything could count for a reason to love. But love is keyed to selective features of the world in ways that make it possible and sometimes important for us to “give reasons” for our love and to assess these. Adams distinguishes between qualitative reasons, which target objective merits in the object, and others that derive from a supposedly valuable relation to the beloved. The latter will sometimes focus, paradoxically, on some failing or vulnerability in the beloved. Adams’s paradigm case of that phenomenon is Desdemona’s love for Othello, which arose from “the dangers [he] had passed” and the pity these evoked in her.<sup>5</sup> Our emotional response to our children, especially in infancy, is perhaps the most striking example of love’s mysterious relation to vulnerability and neediness. Maybe the coincident recognition of something both precious and highly fragile increases our susceptibility to love. The coincidence opens the possibility of an alluring protective relation to the object of love, which is but one example of what Adams calls relational reasons for love: “In these we appeal, not to intrinsic qualities of the loved one, but to ways in which we are (or may be) related to the loved one.”<sup>6</sup> Thus I love my daughter because she is my daughter, or you might love a particular building because you worshipped there as a child, or a certain poem because it stirred you deeply at some moment of crisis in your life.

Only a peculiarly arid rationalism could deny that these are reasons, and often perfectly good reasons, for love. But notice that both qualitative and relational reasons are quite different from reasons for belief in their resistance to universal application. “Although there is no doubt some feature of James which is the reason why I love him, I am not obliged to love William as well, just because he shares that feature.”<sup>7</sup> The point holds whether my reasons for loving James are qualitative (e.g., he is funny and trustworthy) or relational (e.g., we have lived through much together since childhood). Moreover, the fact that I find sufficient reason to love James does not mean that you should love James as well, even if you sincerely agree that I have sufficient reason to love him.

A further point is that love can be admirable when directed toward objects whose value is severely compromised and admirable then not despite but because of the compromised value. An interesting example is parental love for an adult child who has perpetrated some appalling crime. Parents

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<sup>5</sup>Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods*, p. 167.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>7</sup>Roger Scruton, “Emotion, Practical Knowledge and Common Culture,” in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 519-36, at p. 526.

whose love for their child is undermined in these circumstances can scarcely be blamed for that. Yet a steadfast love here is still something many of us will admire, perhaps because love for another human being registers with special vividness the unique value of that life, even when the life has been morally ruined, and so to sustain love against the pull of a legitimate moral repugnance is a laudable accomplishment. Still, there are pitfalls here to which a responsible love will be alert. The intensity of love is conceptually tied to the intensity of the desire that its object prosper, and failings in the beloved, including culpable failings, are easily occluded by that desire. The parents who make bogus excuses for the evil their child has done have succumbed to one familiar moral frailty of love—the loss of truthful perception of the beloved. But the failure here has to do not with loving well what is not worth loving but with loving badly what is worth loving. It is a departure from the proper conduct of love, so to speak, rather than a case of misplaced love. If we remonstrated with these self-deceived parents, the point would not be to show that their child deserved no love but that an apt love could not warrant bogus excuses for evil.

The loss of truthful perception of the beloved is a topic that takes us into the terrain of what I earlier called idolatry. Talk of idolatry outside the context of monotheistic ethics is peculiar, to say the least. But I think a suitably secularized concept of idolatry is useful in making sense of some of the moral lapses to which love makes us susceptible. In its primary application, “idolatry” designates the worship of false gods, though in more extended usage it includes any love that diminishes or taints in some way the devotion due to God. If God moves out of the picture, we still confront the task of loving well in a world where what we do or fail to do in the name of love will affect many other valuable things we do not love. The possibility of love being corrupted in these circumstances is inescapable, and the corruption is not straightforwardly a matter of emotional excess. The loving parents with bogus excuses for an adult child’s crimes do not necessarily love their child more than comparable parents who make no such excuses. The point is rather that the child is “idolized,” illicitly elevated by love in the overall sphere of value in ways that make the parents discount the value of other things, most conspicuously the value of those who were harmed by their child’s wrongdoing.

The notion of idolatry serves my purposes well in another way. Within the monotheistic context, love of God properly entails worship or reverence, and idolatry at least paradigmatically involves the transfer of reverence to false gods. Reverence here is unilateral and follows the hierarchical pattern of premodern political roles: the sublime object of reverence stands above in contrast to the small and massively dependent devotee below. Abasement of self is not the inevitable companion to reverence, but it certainly is in this relation. By contrast, if there is a place

for reverence in an egalitarian secular morality, it can only be in a horizontal relation: a good Kantian will revere the Moral Law in you but the Moral Law requires that she revere it in herself as well. Modern nationalist ideology has brought in its train a patriotic ideal that prescribes something akin to the vertical relation of reverence between patriot and country. Indeed, a close historical connection holds between monotheistic and nationalistic reverence, and not merely a revealing analogy. As Adam Zamoyski has argued, the Christian faith that was shaken by the Enlightenment was in many cases replaced or at least supplemented by quasi-deified conceptions of the nation for which total devotion was demanded.<sup>8</sup> This must be an egregious affront to egalitarian piety because it sets a false god above the dignity of the individual human beings which alone deserves our moral reverence. But then patriotic love cannot be rationally condemned just because of nationalism's excesses. To do so is to confuse the question of what we can love with the question of how we should love it. The fatal error of those who revere a quasi-deified nation is not their love of country but their idolatrous disregard of the proper reverence for individual human lives both within and outside the nation.<sup>9</sup>

I have pressed hard on the distinction between what is worth loving and what it means to love well or badly whatever it is that is worth loving. I have also stressed the importance of truthful perception of the beloved as a criterion of loving well. Nevertheless, I would not deny that the more extreme cases of untruthful perception slide into a kind of misplaced love because the object of emotion becomes a sheer fantasy rather than a partly misperceived item in the real world. And sheer fantasies cannot be worth loving. That point seems to be the germ of truth in George Kateb's coruscating polemic against patriotism. Kateb asks about the meaning of "country" in love of country, and his answer is an amalgam of insight and fallacy:

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<sup>8</sup>Adam Zamoyski, *Holy Madness: Romantics, Patriots and Revolutionaries 1776-1871* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1999). A brilliant case study is David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup>Simon Keller claims that all patriotism harbors bad faith because patriots cannot impartially confront evidence that their country might lack the merits to which they must appeal in justifying their patriotism. Thus, all patriotism at least verges on idolatry. I think Keller's mistake is a failure to take patriotism seriously enough as a species of love. Evidence of a beloved country's demerits would be a grave threat to love if love were like admiration, properly subject to downward revision in the light of any new evidence that the beloved is not so wonderful as one thought. I have shown in this section that what I call love's "generosity" makes it unlike admiration in precisely that respect. To be sure, evidence of the beloved's demerits will be unwelcome to the lover, in patriotic as in other contexts, but that creates no inexorable slide into bad faith for patriotic or any other love. In section 6 I say more about the cognitive distortion to which love makes us susceptible when the value of the beloved is seriously compromised. See Simon Keller, "Patriotism as Bad Faith," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 563-90.

My answer is that one's country—any country—is best understood as an abstraction, for it is a combination of a few actual and many imaginary ingredients ... Of course, a country is a delimited territory ... But it is also constructed out of transmitted memories true and false; a history usually mostly sanitized or falsely heroized; a sense of kinship of a largely invented purity; and social ties that are largely invisible or impersonal, indeed abstract, yet by an act of insistent or dream-like imagination made visible and personal.<sup>10</sup>

This is all a rhetorically brilliant wind-up to the claim that to love a country is to be ready to die for “a figment of the imagination.” American patriots might as well love Atlantis or devote themselves to some imaginary friend, and then die for whichever one they chose. But the quality of Kateb's argument does not quite match the virtuosity of his rhetoric.

Kateb is right that grasping the idea of “my country” requires both abstraction and imagination. These are also often necessary to grasp need and suffering in lives other than one's own. But if the reality of such need and suffering is not undermined by the necessity for abstraction and imagination in coming to understand them, then neither can the reality of my country be undermined by an analogous necessity. Perhaps the point is not that countries are sheer fantasies but that love befits only certain kinds of real and valuable things—“the visible and the personal”—and that patriots must therefore distort the character of what they love to make their love appear apt. But why should love be confined to the visible and personal, or for that matter, any other subset of what is real and valuable? Some people love mathematics or philosophy. They are hardly compelled to pretend that what they love is visible and personal to justify their love. Kateb's caricature of patriotism might still be read as a perspicuous account of the kinds of cognitive distortion that are intrinsic to idolatrous patriotism. His claims about the sheer fabrication of patriotic memory and history are certainly on the mark if idolatrous patriotism is the real target.<sup>11</sup> But we need a less tendentious analysis of the object of patriotic love than he supplies.

### 3.

So what then does “country” mean in love of country? I shall enlist George Orwell to help me fix what I take to be the most politically interesting meaning. Orwell is also useful in further clarifying the distinction between an innocent patriotism and its corruptions.

According to Orwell, patriotism is love for a particular place and the community that resides there and stretches across many generations into

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<sup>10</sup>George Kateb, “Is Patriotism a Mistake?” *Social Research* 67 (2000): 901-24, p. 907.

<sup>11</sup>I have discussed the problems of patriotic history elsewhere. See Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 100-126, where I argue that an historical self-understanding is possible that eludes these pathologies and is still genuinely patriotic.

the past and future. Even though the distinctive character of the community might be accurately portrayed at a given moment in history, patriots need not be nostalgic conservatives who resist change to the country they love. In an arresting metaphor, he depicts England as “an everlasting animal stretching into the future and the past, and, like all living things, having the power to change out of all recognition and yet remain the same”<sup>12</sup>

Patriotism on this account is love of a certain kind of territorially concentrated, intergenerational community to which the patriot belongs and whose survival and prosperity she values deeply. Five points about the content and context of that love require some elaboration. These go beyond Orwell’s conceptual sketch, though they are in keeping with its spirit.

First, patriotism presupposes membership in the country one loves. Love of any country will not do; it has to be love of your *own* country. As a child growing up in Ireland, I was like almost all my friends in being completely besotted with American popular culture. The country that produced music, television shows, and movies of such transcendent merit had to be a marvelous place, or so we thought. If this was not love for America, it was at least a serious infatuation. Except perhaps for those of us who eventually came to live here, it seems intuitively wrong to think of our childish passion for America as an incipient patriotism. More than one country can be one’s own. But a country does not become your own just by falling in love with it from afar. Then again it seems wrong to say that membership in the relevant sense is to be equated with legal citizenship. When political dissidents are stripped of citizenship by oppressive regimes, they do not cease to be capable of patriotic attachment to the country where the regime holds sway. Blacks who volunteered for the Union army at the beginning of the Civil War were not yet citizens in the country for which they willingly risked their lives, though it would be absurd if not indecent to suggest that they could therefore not be American patriots.

For reasons I shall come to shortly, it is a bad mistake to tie patriotism too closely to the state and its legal system, and the proposal that we define the membership that patriotism presupposes as legal citizenship is but one instance of that mistake. Consider a couple of possible criteria for membership that may or may not be aligned with the qualifications for citizenship in positive law. Birth is ordinarily deemed sufficient, because a country is an intergenerational community, and its character as such would be gravely compromised if birth did not ordinarily suffice for membership. And prolonged residence means that the individual’s life is over a substantial period nested directly into the overall life of the relevant community, and that at least suggests a strong presumptive case for

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<sup>12</sup>George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, in *My Country Left or Right 1940-1943: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell II*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 78.

membership so long as residence continues. These specific criteria suggest a more general concept of membership that is loosely tied to the idea of legal citizenship in the following way: to belong to a country in the sense that creates the possibility of patriotism is to satisfy whatever criteria *should* entitle one to citizenship in the state that corresponds to the relevant country, assuming that the country has a state.<sup>13</sup>

Second, patriots assume that their community cannot thrive without political self-rule, and that assumption gives their love of country its distinctive political valence. The American Loyalists who fought with the British in the War of Independence may well have sincerely loved the American colonies, and no doubt many were avid British patriots. Yet their opposition to American independence disqualifies them as *American* patriots. The relevant self-rule that the patriot cherishes need not be democratic, and it may not require the aspiration to full sovereign statehood. Still, a love of one's own country unalloyed by the aspiration to collective self-rule is entirely consistent with collusion with some occupying power implacably opposed to the country's political independence, and that, surely, is the very antithesis of patriotism if anything is.

Third, a country in the relevant sense is constituted in part by its members collectively regarding themselves as part of a bounded intergenerational community. After the 2004 federal election, a map was circulated on the Internet that depicted all the states that had voted for John Kerry as attached to Canada and forming with it the "The United States of Canada." The rest of the USA was now "Jesusland." If some poor souls fell in love with the idea of a United States of Canada (or Jesusland) on seeing the map, they would not be the first patriots of a newly created country—not because there are no states corresponding to the boundaries that the map delineated, but because those who inhabit "The United States of Canada" and "Jesusland" do not collectively conceive themselves as part of unitary intergenerational communities who share the aspiration to self-rule, and it would be Quixotic to suppose that they could be persuaded to do so.

That countries are collectively imagined undertakings in self-rule, at least at the level of aspiration and often in fact, is important to understanding why people come to love them. A revealing analogy here might be between an individual musician's performance within a complex work involving many performers and the public life of the individual in the history of a beloved country. I take it that integral to one's self-understanding

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<sup>13</sup>For those who maintain that ethnic descent should constrain legal citizenship, patriotism collapses into ethnic nationalism. But that is but one possible conception of membership among others. A beloved community of the relevant kind might be replenished through migration that occurs without regard to ethnic origins, and patriots need not see that as detracting from intergenerational continuity. Still, the patriot will presumably wish the children of immigrants to make the community their own so that they and their parents can look to its future with a depth of attachment.

as part of any musical ensemble is that participants are trying to create something of value together, and they interpret their individual roles in light of that shared self-understanding. If I strum along on my guitar while playing a John Coltrane compact disc at home, I am not part of a collective endeavor of the relevant kind, however wonderful my playing (to say nothing of Coltrane's) might be. For one thing, the give and take of real collaborative creativity, as musicians respond to each other by way of inspiration or correction, is ruled out unless we can really interact with each other. That does not mean that individual contributions cannot be abstracted for critical appraisal, though even then it is their contribution to the whole that matters, not their freestanding merits. And a crucial point is that even contributions that are modest in themselves may be exalted as part of something greater than anyone could possibly hope to achieve alone. A role in the chorus at a splendid performance of Handel's *Messiah* could well be the best moment of a good year in a good life, even if one's voice is not that great. In parallel ways, a common project of political self-rule that stretches across many lives and generations is an exercise in collective creativity in which shared successes elevate the value of even modest civic accomplishments on the part of individual citizens. And by the way, this suggests that widespread opportunities for democratic participation provide important avenues of self-fulfillment through citizenship that other regimes cannot. They are the analog of musical ensembles in which everyone can try to play a large and taxing part if they so choose, and one that has much room for improvisation as well.

But if individual political agency can take on an enhanced value as part of a successful and cherished project of collective self-rule, its value might be diminished or squandered altogether by the shared failures of the project. In just the way that a great voice in the chorus of a lousy performance of Handel's *Messiah* is wasted, the shame of the honorable patriot whose country is implicated in oppression and other evils attests to a parallel kind of waste. And this makes the fourth claim I want to make about patriotism provoke further doubts about its rationality: unlike garden variety loves, patriotism requires constancy. Patriots are ready to incur burdensome sacrifices for the sake of what they love. But what is the point of their constancy if the collective endeavor to which it contributes is a grievous failure? One could insist on the pointlessness of constancy in these circumstances while acknowledging that an ethically passive love is entirely rational. Even if self-rule has been a moral calamity, any country will have merits that capture some hearts, and perhaps much more important, for those who grow up on its soil will provide the social matrix for all formative experiences, and thus a powerful source of relational reasons to love. But although these may be good reasons to love one's country, it might be hard at first blush to see how they make a virtue

of constancy. I say more about this below when I discuss the motivational role that patriotism can play in the creation of just institutions where they do not exist. The short answer here is that constancy can secure a patriotic love that is admirable even when a country has been the site of recent and terrible events such as ethnic atrocities or religious pogroms. Those whose love is steadfast against the despair or revulsion such events will evoke among all humane people will likely be the ones to rebuild their community in the aftermath of horror. After all, dreadful musical ensembles can be innocently and easily abandoned by musicians who make better use of their talents elsewhere. Projects of collective self-rule are not so easily dissolved when things go badly wrong, and patriots with the constancy to rebuild their communities may be critical to the necessary tasks of repair.

Fifth, on the account of patriotism I have given, the connection between love of country and regard for the institutions through which the country happens to be governed at a given point in time is accidental. If these are perceived by the patriot to conduce to the country's security and prosperity over time, they will be prized. But their value is still entirely instrumental. No doubt the perceived value of a governmental institution may become so settled that it appears to figure among the qualitative reasons that patriots cite for their love, as Americans sometimes appeal to the genius of their constitution. Still, I suspect that the appearance is likely to be deceptive. If you could convince American patriots that their constitution is a much more flawed instrument of good government than they thought it was, that is much more likely to seem to them a good reason for constitutional reform than a reason to love America less.

Orwell's understanding of the object of love proper to patriotism differs from alternatives that make basic political institutions the relevant emotional object.<sup>14</sup> At the very least, these alternatives seem to me much more revisionary than their exponents acknowledge. If a political constitution is the object of love, then one cannot be a republican and a patriot in Canada, for example, but patriotism strictly requires republicanism and liberalism in America. On the other hand, liberalism is prohibited and republicanism and Islamic theocracy are mandatory for Iranian patriots, while Bretons, Basques, and Kurds cannot possibly be patriots because they have no state, though with some luck they might one day be eligible for patriotism. This is plainly not how we actually use the language of patriotism, except perhaps when we are engaged in witch-hunts that require us to pretend that compatriots who are radical political dissidents cannot possibly love the

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<sup>14</sup>E.g., Andrew Levine, "Just Nationalism: The Future of an Illusion," in Jocelyne Couture, Kai Nielsen, and Michael Seymour (eds.), *Rethinking Nationalism* (*Canadian Journal of Philosophy* suppl. vol. 22 (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1998)), pp. 345-63, at p. 357; Harry Brighouse, "Should We Teach Patriotic History?" in Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (eds.), *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 157-76, at p. 159.

country we share. And that exposes the deeper problem with state or constitution-centered conceptions of patriotism: they disguise the ways in which a common love of country can open a space for radical critique of established institutions that cannot be dismissed as sheer treachery or subversion. If a country is loved in Orwell's sense, then the question of whether its political constitution befits that love is irrevocably open.

Orwell is revealing in part because his patriotism was revolutionary, and so marked the greatest possible distance between love of country and devotion to established institutions. At the time he wrote *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he imagined that the struggle against fascism could not ultimately succeed without radical political change in England that included the end of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> His contempt for Britain's ruling elite and the political institutions that protected their privilege was not a damper on his patriotism but a sign of its ardor, because he believed that without their overthrow a decent life for all his compatriots and their descendents could never be achieved.

Yet for anyone who lived through the middle decades of the twentieth century, the fact that appalling things can be done in the name of patriotism was perhaps more vivid than at any point in human history, and in his "Notes on Nationalism" in 1945 Orwell attempted to come to grips with that fact. He makes patriotism and nationalism into mutually exclusive categories. The patriot cherishes his country as "the best in the world" but has no desire to compel anyone else to think likewise. "Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power. The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and prestige ... for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality."<sup>16</sup>

Orwell is not the most exact writer, and you can learn little from him without correcting for some recklessness with conceptual detail. For one thing, patriots need not suppose that the countries they love are the best in the world any more than loving parents need to think their children are the best, even if declarations to the contrary are sometimes a harmlessly extravagant way of expressing the depth of their passion. Love is not first prize in any competition. Treating patriotism and nationalism as mutually exclusive categories is a further mistake, because it leads Orwell to overlook the very familiar possibility of a quite genuine love of country that is corrupted by the lust for national power and prestige. That is exactly the condition of the idolatrous patriot I described earlier who "sinks his individuality" in an image of the deified nation. Nevertheless, the nationalist mentality that Orwell describes does seem to capture a kind of evil that is

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<sup>15</sup>Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, pp. 94-109.

<sup>16</sup>George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism," in *As I Please 1943-1945: The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. III, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp. 361-80, at p. 362.

not a corrupted love of country but rather a counterfeit version. Parents fixated with their child's competitive success in some area, constantly extolling them and denigrating the competition, give us less reason to suspect them of idolatrous love than to worry that their child has become the object of a vicarious lust for power that has nothing to do with love. By the same token, the fiercely competitive spirit of Orwellian nationalism may reveal not so much an idolatrous as a merely counterfeit love of country.

Yet if Orwell gives us compelling moral reason to despise nationalism, he gives us no reason to regard the cultivation of patriotism as a good thing in general. He may have been right that the defeat of fascism ultimately depended in some measure on the mobilization of working-class patriotism. But it was only a strangely contrived distinction between patriotism and nationalism that obscured for him the possibility that an idolatrous patriotism played some role in the rise of fascism. We need some understanding of the conditions under which patriotism might be obligatory or virtuous. To consider the first of these possibilities, I compare patriotic with parental and filial attachments. If the notion of an obligation to love has any intuitive appeal it is surely in relationships between parents and children, and so these provide a paradigm case with which love of country can be compared. For the idea of patriotism as a virtue, I turn to the theory of moral learning that Rawls canvassed in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* as part of his argument for the stability of the well-ordered society.

#### 4.

That vexed question of patriotism's moral status arises in recent philosophical literature in discussion of the associative obligations that are supposed to derive from common citizenship and warrant legitimate departures from cosmopolitan moral norms.<sup>17</sup> But even if there were cogent arguments for strong associative obligations among compatriots, it seems doubtful that *love* of country could be obligatory or that such love could by itself generate associative obligations. The sheer particularism of reasons for love makes talk of any general obligations they might yield seem dubious. Still, there is one familiar setting where talk of associative obligations and love are both at home, so to speak.

The paradigm for associative obligations is the family, and it does seem right to say that parents have an obligation to love their children when they are growing up; I would even say, though this is obviously more controversial, that adult children have an obligation to reciprocate love when

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<sup>17</sup>Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Patriotism a Virtue," Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1984; Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 77.

their parents have loved and cared for them as they should. But two claims that seem necessary to any case for an obligation to love on the part of adult children have no plausible analogs in the case of patriotism. First, love is central to our understanding of the distinctive good of family relations, and second, those who have been loved well as children will naturally come to love those who have loved them and to sustain that love throughout their lives. When adults cease to love their parents, it will be reasonable to look for fault on the children's side if their parents have not willfully forfeited love. But love is not central to any reasonable understanding of the goods that political cooperation furnishes, and it would be rash to suppose that people who do not love the countries in which they are citizens must be morally remiss, whether they have grown up there or not.

Thus, if an American citizen says he cannot love his country because of its cult of gun violence, rampant religious hypocrisy, and disgusting consumerism, some people would find it hard to object. No doubt many others would not find it hard at all. But then again they will likely have difficulty objecting to the American who cannot love her country because of the unmanly decadence of its major cities, the rising tide of secular humanism, and the steady decline of family values. Any diverse country of more than negligible size will have a kaleidoscopic character such that good reasons to love it and hate it are evident from just about any evaluative perspective you care to imagine, and that undermines any argument for an obligation to be patriotic from any such perspective. But if it is true that Americans have no associative obligation to be patriotic, it is also surely true that the many who are patriotic do not acquire extra associative obligations just because they are patriotic. Patriotic love may motivate us to do things that put us under new obligations, such as volunteering for military service. But then again people can be motivated to do the same things by other desires, and whatever obligations they incur by doing so are scarcely diminished by the absence of patriotic love. In short, whatever can be said about the moral status of patriotism would seem to have nothing to do with the associative obligations that common citizenship does or does not generate. If there is something positive to be said about the moral value of patriotism, it must lie elsewhere.

## 5.

The citizens of Rawls's well-ordered society live under just institutions and behave fairly in their dealings with others on the understanding that their fairness will be reciprocated. They enter society only through birth and exit by death. Rawls worried that the stability of even the well-ordered society could not be assured over time, and toward the end of *A Theory of Justice* he elaborated a conception of moral formation that makes the

psychological congruence of love and justice the fulcrum of stability.<sup>18</sup>

At every stage in Rawls's theory, the evolving sense of justice is thoroughly enmeshed with particularistic attachments. Earlier attachments are not transcended by later ones. Instead, they develop cumulatively into a nested set of loyalties that in combination with the sense of justice constitute the ethical identity of citizens. The focus of the theory is the development of "sentiments," which are defined as "permanent ordered families of governing dispositions, such as the sense of justice and the love of mankind, and ... lasting attachments to particular individuals or associations ... in a person's life."<sup>19</sup> What Rawls calls the "natural" sentiments of love and trust are supposed to develop under the aegis of just institutions in a way that implicates the moral sentiment of justice.

This process begins in the family, with the emergence of authority guilt in the relation between children and parents, and then proceeds through a succession of increasingly complex and inclusive associations up to the national community itself. The reliable exercise of the sense of justice within these associations engenders attachment to them and their members: "Thus if those engaged in a system of social cooperation regularly act with evident intention to uphold its just (or fair) rules, bonds of friendship and mutual trust tend to develop among them, thereby holding them ever more securely to the scheme."<sup>20</sup> Love and justice thus evolve as mutually reinforcing sentiments. At the culminating stage of moral learning, "persons understand their sense of justice as an extension of their natural attachments, and as a way of caring about the collective good."<sup>21</sup> The emergence of a "morality of principle" at the final stage gives the sense of justice a deeper motivational basis:

Individuals in their role as citizens with a full understanding of the content of the principles of justice may be moved to act upon them largely because of their bonds to particular persons and an attachment to their own society. Once a morality of principles is accepted, however, moral attitudes are no longer connected solely with the well-being and approval of particular individuals and groups, but are shaped by a conception of right chosen irrespective of these contingencies.<sup>22</sup>

The phrase "irrespective of these contingencies" cannot be meant to suggest that our moral sentiments now operate independently of our natural attachments. For even within the morality of principle, the "moralities of authority and association" are supposed to be included; "the virtues of the other moralities receive their explanation and justification" within a

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<sup>18</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 453-62.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 479.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid. p. 470.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 496.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 475.

context of principle, and their “respective claims” are merely adjusted rather than annulled by that context.<sup>23</sup>

Although the word “patriotism” is entirely absent from Rawls’s account, the concept plays a decisive role in the transition from the morality of association to the morality of principle. The interplay of natural and moral sentiment that is the very engine of moral formation from the beginnings of the morality of authority culminates in reflective citizenship in the well-ordered society. And it is not well-ordered societies in general to which the individual becomes attached, but the one in particular that has conferred its benefits both on the self and on all to whom the self is tied through a dense network of associational roles. “To insure stability men must have a sense of justice or a concern for those who would be disadvantaged by their defection, preferably both. When these sentiments are sufficiently strong to overrule the temptations to violate the rules, just schemes are stable.”<sup>24</sup> The convergence of love for the well-ordered society and the sense of justice provide the preferred dual bulwark against defection because any defection would constitute both an injustice and the betrayal of cherished compatriots.

In the subsequent development of Rawls’s political liberalism, the problem of stability is central, though the idea of an overlapping consensus is now touted as its solution and his conception of moral formation is scarcely mentioned.<sup>25</sup> But I suggest that the idea of an overlapping consensus responds to a somewhat different facet of the problem of stability than the one addressed in the theory of moral formation, and thus whatever success it achieves gives Rawls no good reason to dispense with the latter. The idea of an overlapping consensus is supposed to explain how individuals who embrace irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines can still achieve reasonable agreement on principles of justice.<sup>26</sup> It does not explain, however, how that agreement will prevail against “temptations to violate the rules” when natural sentiment is pitted against them. By showing how natural and moral sentiments can be reconciled, the theory of moral formation complements the idea of an overlapping consensus in explaining stability. In fact, one might argue that the alignment of natural and moral sentiment becomes a more rather than a less pressing task once the fact of reasonable pluralism looms as the most formidable threat to stability. After all, rival comprehensive doctrines may corrupt public

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 478.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 497.

<sup>25</sup>John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). A footnote on pp. 49-50 assimilates Scanlon’s conception of moral motivation with Rawls’s notion of the reasonable, which is in turn said to be an “analog” to the morality of principle in *A Theory of Justice*. This somewhat cryptic observation is the only direct reference to the theory of moral development that I am aware of in Rawls’s later work.

<sup>26</sup>Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 133-72.

reason by motivating competing interpretations of principles that lie within an overlapping consensus after it has been established. Citizens' commitment to the ideal of reciprocity is supposed to arrest the corrosive effects competing interpretations will have on stability.<sup>27</sup> But then we need to ask how that commitment is to be shored up against the centrifugal pressures inevitably pitted against it, and a plausible answer that does not involve the melding of moral and natural sentiment in the manner that Rawls envisaged in *A Theory of Justice* is far from obvious.

The virtue of patriotism in the well-ordered society consists in its reliable support to the moral sentiments in upholding the stability of just institutions. Nothing follows about the merits of cultivating patriotism in the less than well-ordered societies we actually inhabit. But Rawls's argument is nonetheless helpful, because by considering the most prominent respects in which substantially unjust societies differ from the well-ordered society we can bring its moral status in unjust societies into clearer view. Two differences are especially salient. First, the role that patriotism might play in sustaining domestic injustice is obscured in the well-ordered society because its basic structure is already just. Second, because the well-ordered society is a "self-contained" national community, no possibility arises that patriotism will motivate morally illicit partiality for compatriots over others. I address these two differences in succession.

## 6.

No divergence between institutional loyalty and a morally apt patriotism is possible in the well-ordered society, and for that reason, the conceptual difference between the two never rises to the surface in Rawls's discussion. Divergence will certainly occur when institutions are substantially unjust. Yet love entails the desire that the object of one's love prosper, and a morally apt love will be shaped by true beliefs about what its prosperity consists in. A country cannot prosper without just institutions, even if there are other excellences that a patriot will prize as ingredients of its prosperity.

Unfortunately, we can have no assurance that those who sincerely love their country under conditions of institutional injustice will have the true beliefs about what its prosperity consists in that would enable them to recognize the injustice. On the contrary, beliefs about what is just and unjust formed under the aegis of unjust institutions are highly vulnerable to corruption, and love of country confers no immunity to that corruption. You might be tempted to go a step further. I said earlier that one familiar frailty of love is our susceptibility to lose truthful perception of the beloved when its value has been severely compromised, and my ex-

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., liv-lv.

ample was the parent who makes bogus excuses for the child who is guilty of grave wrongdoing. You might suppose that patriots are afflicted with a parallel susceptibility to cognitive distortion under unjust conditions, and you might infer that nonpatriots are therefore likely to be better able to see domestic injustice for what it is. Maybe they are akin to dispassionate, impartial jurors at a criminal trial rather than the emotionally fraught parents of the accused. But the step further is a mistake.

The first thing to remember here is the difference between love of country and regard for the state. The existence of unjust institutions is reason to condemn the state that includes or permits them; it is not necessarily a reason to condemn the people whose state it is. Those who are averse to condemning the people are not necessarily disinclined to condemn the state when condemnation is warranted. That does not quite get patriots off the hook. At least where the state is broadly responsive to the will of its citizens, the persistence of unjust institutions is properly a matter of collective shame for those who regard the state as enacting a cherished project of self-rule. Patriotic susceptibility to that shame may well trigger a self-deception that obscures what is shameful. Yet this still cannot confer any general advantage to nonpatriots in recognizing domestic injustice. That is so because we cannot assume nonpatriots will be adequately interested in discerning the justice or injustice of domestic institutions in the first place. Not to care about your country is to lack one familiar motive for caring about whether its political institutions are just. Of course, I might care nothing for my country and yet have strong cosmopolitan moral interests that make me adequately interested in impartially assessing the justice of its institutions. However, nonpatriots who are strong cosmopolitans are not necessarily more numerous than patriots who can curb the propensity to avoid the shameful recognition of domestic injustice. That being so, we seem to have no grounds to suppose that patriots have any general disadvantage over nonpatriots in identifying domestic injustice under nonideal conditions.

Yet in another respect I claim that patriots have a general advantage over nonpatriots: their love of country blurs the distinction between self-interest and the interests of compatriots in a way that makes action to support the creation of just institutions less costly. Suppose we agree with Rawls that all of us have a natural duty to support just institutions, a duty that requires us “to assist in the establishment of just arrangements when they do not exist, at least when this can be done with little cost to ourselves.”<sup>28</sup> The “cost to ourselves” of some sacrifice is partly a function of what we love. Thus the “cost to me” of abandoning work to take care of my children when they are seriously ill is much less than the “cost to me” of doing so to take care of a stranger’s children. The pros-

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<sup>28</sup>Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 334.

perity of my children and my own good are so closely enmeshed by virtue of love that questions of “cost to me” scarcely arise. By the same token, the natural duty to “assist in the establishment of just institutions when they do not exist” is less costly, and to that extent has greater motivational impetus, once such institutions are seen as intrinsic to the prosperity of a beloved country. That being so, morally apt patriotism may be as important to the prospects of justice in a substantially unjust society as it is to the stability of just institutions in the well-ordered society.

This conclusion is consistent with unjust institutions being commonly allied with morally inapt patriotism and the historical salience of aggressive group interests that simply masquerade as patriotism. And no doubt there are circumstances in which the rhetoric of patriotism has been so egregiously abused that attempts to rehabilitate it for honorable purposes will merely provoke the disgust of honorable people. In fact, we should probably expect little correlation between morally apt patriotism and the frequency with which the rhetoric of patriotism is actually used. Especially in political cultures where the practice of branding your opponents as unpatriotic is widespread, a moratorium on the rhetoric of patriotism would likely serve everyone’s interests well.

The most loving family is not necessarily the one that talks the most about love, and similarly, it would be as bad a mistake to confound the sentiment of patriotic love in the polity with the salience of patriotic rhetoric. For example, a mutually acknowledged patriotism can provide a basis for mutual trust among those who disagree about institutional reform and thereby open social space for deliberative politics where it might not otherwise exist. Insofar as it is mutually and confidently acknowledged, the concord of patriotic sentiment will tend to be ignored. Alternatively, when talk about who is and is not patriotic does surface in discussion, it may be a worrisome sign that trust is no longer taken for granted, and that deliberation is giving way to a particularly foul variety of adversarial politics. Contrary to what Samuel Johnson said, patriotism is not the last refuge of scoundrels. Their last refuge is surely the claim that those who would criticize my politics are giving support to the enemies of our country.

I suggested earlier that the kaleidoscopic character of the countries we live in gives us many reasons to love and not love them. No real country is quite as lovable as the well-ordered society. So even if patriotism is a very useful ally to the natural duty to support just domestic institutions, we should be very wary of the earnest moralism that so often attends its cultivation. Precisely because a candid confrontation with the scale of domestic injustice will expose what some will internalize as reasons not to love their country, there will be a tendency to abandon candor. But of course that is utterly self-defeating if the creation of just institutions is what counts. Furthermore, the particularistic logic of reasons for love

means that even if you agree that my reasons for loving the country we share are excellent reasons, they do not necessarily suffice to motivate love in your case, and their failure to do so warrants no reproach to you. There is something repulsive about a political culture in which people are called to account for what they love, even if what they love can bolster the likelihood that justice will prevail.

Perhaps the least propitious setting for a patriotism that supports domestic justice is when a given territory contains communities whose traditional political aspirations have entailed the domination of the other so that the triumph of one patriotism requires not just the defeat of the other but also large-scale oppression. In other words, we have competing idolatrous patriotisms, and their competition consists precisely in the fact that they cannot peacefully coexist. A decent response to this is to wish a plague on both their houses: a world without their love of country would be a world without their murderous rivalry. But that is not the only decent response, and I doubt that it is often the wisest. What common sense will generally suggest in such cases is some variation on cantonal arrangements, with each community offered a separate sphere of self-determination within broadly confederal authority over shared concerns. But one might conjecture that the stability of such political settlements will depend not on the extinction of patriotism but on the erosion of its idolatrous excesses as each people moderates its traditional demands to fit within a constitutional framework that accommodates what is reasonable in its rival's claims.

## 7.

This takes us to the final concern about the moral status of patriotism, a concern evaded in the well-ordered society by making the society self-contained. Patriots are disposed to be partial to their compatriots, and because concern for compatriots often coincides with appalling indifference to the fate of others, it is tempting to infer some noxious link between the partiality and the indifference.

The first matter to clarify here is the quite circumscribed sense in which patriotism entails partiality for compatriots. Patriots are by definition dedicated to furthering the prosperity of the countries to which they belong as enterprises of collective self-rule, and to whatever extent that entails a particular concern for the fate of compatriots over the fate of others, it entails partiality. Other things being equal, for example, the oppression of compatriots will arouse a keener interest among patriots. But other things are commonly not equal. American patriots who are also conscientious citizens of the world might reasonably decide that genocide in Darfur is a more pressing matter for their government's attention than injustice in Des Moines, and that decision would no more attest to

the absence of patriotism than attending a political rally instead of taking your child to a movie reveals a paucity of parental love and constancy. Much depends here on what one takes to be the proper ends of political self-rule. On a nationalist (in Orwell's sense) reading of these ends, the prosperity of one's country is all about its comparative power and prestige. So partiality for compatriots is inevitably conjoined with invidious prejudice toward others. But that is but one possible conception of a beloved country's prosperity, and a morally obnoxious one at that. A country might be loved, and loved deeply, under a very different description: as a project of collective self-rule in which the achievement of domestic justice is combined with due regard for the rights and interests of others with whom the world is shared. I offer no particular conception of what due regard for others would require, say, of American patriots in contemporary circumstances; I merely note the gross intuitive implausibility of supposing that the best conception would constrain partiality for compatriots so severely as to oblige them to give up their patriotism.

One interesting question that persists is whether, given that cosmopolitan moral premises might justify radical reform to the existing state system, patriotism would tend to function as an obstacle to reform. Unless the reform that cosmopolitan morality would justify also required the suppression of all substantial partiality for compatriots—and I doubt that any morally credible program of reform could require that—then a substantial patriotism need not be an obstacle to reform. Presumably, the worry then is that idolatrous tendencies within the patriotic traditions of some nation states would tend to escalate in response to any initiative that would disperse sovereignty. That is empirically speculative, though by no means unreasonable. But here again the confusion of patriotism with loyalty to established institutional authority may work its mischief. Love of country requires no one to make a fetish of the corresponding state, assuming that there is one. The self-determination worth having does not stand or fall with the established system of sovereign states, and there is no reason to suppose that patriots must be ignorant of that. If they happen to be ignorant, they can be disabused of that without being required to give up their patriotism.<sup>29</sup>

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